

[East Valley Tribune](#)

Mike Branom

It is a cruel irony of hard economic times that the charitable organizations struggle at the very time when their services are most in need.

United Food Bank in Mesa distributes emergency food boxes to agencies across the East Valley, and demand has jumped 71 percent this fiscal year compared to 2007-08. But as spokeswoman Donna Rodgers notes, also rising is the cost of providing these boxes - but down are the supplies of food.

"One positive thing I can tell you, is that more people are stepping forward to help," Rodgers said. "The downside of that is, they can't help at the level we need."

One person stepping forward is U.S. Rep Harry Mitchell.

On Tuesday morning, Mitchell, D-Ariz., toured the Paz de Cristo Community Center in west Mesa before announcing he would divide his congressional cost-of-living pay increases of the last two years, totaling \$8,500, among 15 Valley charities.

Mitchell also donated last year, and hopes Congress passes proposed legislation halting these raises.

"To me, it was simple: In a time of war and economic struggle, it is inappropriate for members of Congress to increase their pay," Mitchell said

The salary for rank-and-file members of the House and Senate is \$174,000 per year. In January, a pay raise of \$4,700 took effect.

Paz de Cristo is among five new charities benefitting from Mitchell's generosity. The soup kitchen/food bank for the homeless and working poor also is feeling the crunch of the rough economy, its director said.

"About a year and a half ago, we were doing a lot when we gave out 450," Michael Boos said of the twice-monthly distribution of food boxes. "Now, we're giving out anywhere between 650 and 800.

"The meal service is, maybe, a 10 to 15 percent increase over last year."

At the after-school program Improving Chandler Area Neighborhoods, contributions by individuals are remaining steady. However, added Executive Officer Christy McClendon, it's the donations themselves that are shrinking.

Yet that's not what has McClendon worried the most.

"We're going to see our biggest impact in grant funding, with government grants and foundation grants," McClendon said. "Many of our municipalities are hurting. With foundations, they're seeing an impact to their assets."

On the second point, Rodgers was more blunt: "With the foundations, they are required to distribute certain percentages of the investments they make. Well, if you're not making any money, there's nothing to give out."

McClendon said ICAN receives about 70 percent of its annual funding from these grants.

With the state government cutting its budget to the bone and beyond, also sliced is funding for nonprofit agencies. The Sojourner Center, a domestic violence shelter in Phoenix contracting

with the state, will lose \$370,000 this fiscal year.

And next year, warned Executive Director Connie Phillips, could be far worse. If the Arizona Department of Economic Security's budget is cut too much, then what little money is made available to nonprofits won't be enough for Sojourner Center to qualify for matching federal funds.

"It could actually wipe out \$2.5 million from our contract, which is half our budget," Phillips said.

Phillips went on to say nonprofits like Sojourner Center need a public-private partnership to succeed. But if half of that partnership stops helping?

"You can't change the rules," Phillips said. "We've been in this game forever. This was the agreement."

IF YOU WANT TO HELP

United Food Bank's Donna Rodgers offers three ways people can aid charitable organizations: Food, funds and friends. As in, if you can't spare any money or consumables, there's always the option of volunteering.

Rodgers also said there is a "virtual food drive," to be found at www.unitedfoodbank.org/index.php?/cart. The agency's phone number is (480) 926-4897.

Improving Chandler Area Neighborhoods also takes in-kind contributions, in which citizens can donate items such as board games, sports equipment, DVDs and gas cards. There is a wish list of goods on ICAN's Web site (www.icanaz.org). Information can be obtained by calling (480) 821-4207.

Sojourner Center - www.sojournercenter.org and (602) 244-0997, Ext. 107 - also takes in-kind donations, which will then go to battered spouses seeking to restart their lives.

In addition, Sojourner has worked out a partnership with Private Quarters, which sells bedding and linens at house parties, in which 15 percent of a purchase made this month will go to the agency.

Paz de Cristo can be contacted at (480) 464-2370 or through www.pazdecristo.org .